

HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE TORREY BOTANICAL CLUB

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The New York Botanical Garden

The Torrey Botanical Club developed so gradually from a mere group of associated botanical enthusiasts into a full-fledged scientific society that it is quite impossible to fix upon an exact date of origin which might not be honestly disputed. In an early number of the *Bulletin*, the beginnings of the Club are traced to "the summer of 1866";* a few years later the editor remarked in a footnote "not later than 1865";† in later years Dr. Allen, one of the earliest members, is said to have claimed as early a date as 1858,‡ but there is nothing to verify this claim, and it is possible that he has been misquoted. Dr. Thurber, in his inaugural address as president of the Club, in 1873, when many if not most of the original members of the Club must have been among his auditors, declared frankly: "We have no record of the date of the beginning of the Club."§

The earliest positive evidence of the existence of an association which can be definitely connected with our present organization seems to be a small printed notice preserved in our archives. It is dated at the office of the *American Agriculturist*, December 10, 1867, signed by George Thurber and Thomas Hogg, and calls a meeting of "the Botanical Club, to be held at this office on Saturday, the 14th inst., at 2 o'clock P. M. A full attendance is desired, in order that final arrangements may be made for the festival of the 20th." Presumably the meeting thus called was duly held, for on the 20th the Club gathered, with various botanically distinguished guests from out of town, to enjoy a supper at the Astor House. The occasion was the celebration of the fiftieth anni-

* Bull. Torrey Club 1: 45. 1870.

† Bull. Torrey Club 4: 26. 1873.

‡ Bull. Torrey Club 27: 552. 1900.

§ Bull. Torrey Club 4: 26. 1873.

versary of the presentation (December 22, 1817) by Dr. Torrey, to the Lyceum of Natural History, of the manuscript of his catalogue of plants growing spontaneously within thirty miles of the city of New York. An account of the celebration was published at the time in the *American Naturalist*,* and in the *Bulletin*, a few years later, it is clearly stated that it "still further united the members, and the present organization was effected."† It is at least from as early as December 20, 1867, therefore, that we may without dispute date the establishment of the Club; and it is that date of which we are now (somewhat prematurely) celebrating the fiftieth anniversary. Unfortunately, no complete list of those present at the meeting of organization has been preserved, and if we do not count the guests, only eleven members of the Club are positively known to have been there; it is probable, however, that there were fifteen or more.

For the years 1868 and 1869 there are no records of the Club extant, although regular monthly meetings seem to have been held throughout the year, both winter and summer. The speaker has in his possession an original written notice referring to the meeting of February, 1868, which reads: "The meeting of the Botanical Club is unavoidably postponed until Friday eve. next, Feby 21st." The same year, June 30, the Club lost its first member by death: William Wallace Denslow, "one of the earliest, most enthusiastic, and, with the disadvantage of feeble health, one of the most indefatigable."‡

The beginning of the year 1870 found the Club still a very informal association. It had no written constitution, no officers, no formal list of its membership. It was even without a name, being known to its members familiarly as "the Club," or more formally as "the Botanical Club," and to outsiders as the "Botanical Club of New York." At this time William H. Leggett, one of the earliest and most faithful of the founders, started, as a private venture, a modest four-page monthly sheet to which he gave the name "Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club." Of course this journal, which was the first botanical periodical in America, was issued with the approval of the Club, but the entire

* *Am. Nat.* 2: 41-47. 1868.

† *Bull. Torrey Club* 1: 45. 1870.

‡ *Bull. Torrey Club* 1: 45. 1870.

financial responsibility rested with the editor for many years, and American botany will ever be indebted to the memory of Leggett for the powerful and helpful influence thus exerted by him upon its development at a critical period. It is not by accident that even the latest volume of the *Bulletin* bears upon its title-page the inscription "Founded by William Henry Leggett, 1870."

The name "Torrey Botanical Club" made its first appearance in public upon the first page of the first number of the *Bulletin*, and it is a tradition among us that this name was selected and applied to the Club, by the editor, in order to have what he regarded as a satisfactory name for his periodical, and was thereupon accepted without question (except for mild protest on the part of the modest president, Dr. Torrey) by the other members. In any event, and however it originated, the name "stuck," and has never been altered to this day, in spite of the very different kind of associations to which the name "Club" is now commonly applied.

The first list of officers and members was published in the *Bulletin* for December, 1870. The editor mentions that "the association is rather informal, and somewhat fluctuating," and apologizes for any consequent "errors and deficiencies." The list (including W. W. Denslow, mentioned as already deceased) comprises thirty names; and these persons have ever since been regarded as the founders of the Club, although it is certain that not all of them had been members from 1867. There is one notable omission from the list; namely, Thomas Hogg, whose name was one of those signed to the printed call of December 10, 1867 (as already mentioned), and who was certainly a member of the Club both before and after the date of the printed list, so that the omission of his name was probably an oversight. The addition of his name makes the number of "founders" (that is, members prior to 1871) thirty-one. When Dr. Timothy Field Allen died in 1902, it was supposed by most of the members of the Club that he was the last surviving founder; when James Hyatt died in 1904, it was stated in *Torreya* that he was the last. James Sheldon Merriam, however, did not die until 1908, and at least two of those whose names appear on the list of December, 1870, are still living. These are Charles Belknap Gerard, now of Muskogee, Oklahoma, and Rev. Dr. Herbert McKenzie Denslow, who has

again, after a long interval, been one of our fellow-members for the last seven years.

In 1871 the Club decided upon incorporation, desiring, as it was facetiously expressed by Dr. Thurber, to "enjoy the privilege of suing and being sued." An act of incorporation was passed by the Assembly of the State of New York, April 21, 1871, but it was seriously defective, and the Club refused to accept it and failed to organize in compliance with its provisions. The first defect, for which it is not unlikely that Dr. Torrey was responsible, was that the corporate name was given as the "New York Botanical Club." The other defect was a mere reflection of the corrupt politics of that period, and consisted in the inclusion among the incorporators of two members of the infamous "Tweed ring." To remedy the defects the act was amended by the legislature, April 29, 1872, but even then the Club was very slow to effect organization under its provisions. The charter was accepted unanimously at the meeting of January 7, 1873, and a committee appointed to draft a constitution and by-laws; but these were not adopted until March 25, and the first officers were not elected in accordance with them until April 29.

Meanwhile, on the tenth of March, the beloved president, whose inspiring influence had brought the Club into existence, and whose name it bore, Professor John Torrey, had breathed his last, and the Club had become a monument to his memory. Few are the botanists now living who remember Torrey, but his kindness, his gentleness, his patience, his earnestness, his scholarship—these still seem vividly real, even to us who know them only by the recorded testimony of those who both respected and loved him. The Torrey Botanical Club could bear no name more deserving of honor.

The first president elected under the provisions of the new constitution was Dr. George Thurber, well known as a student of grasses. He had been botanist to the Mexican Boundary Survey, and first head of the department of botany at the Michigan agricultural college, before coming to New York; and he was at this time, and for many years afterward, editor of the *American Agriculturist*. Fortunate it is that his inaugural address, rich in reminiscence, was printed in full in the *Bulletin*. The vice-presi-

dency, a new office at this time, was filled by the election of Dr. Timothy Field Allen, to whom tradition credits the first suggestion looking toward the formation of the Club.

Dr. Thurber's presidency covered a period of about seven years. The meeting-place of the Club continued to be the Herbarium of Columbia College, with which Dr. Torrey's memory was so indissolubly associated. The *Bulletin* grew from a four-page to a twelve-page monthly, and the scope of the papers published broadened noticeably. In this connection it may be remarked, however, that although the founders of the Club were mostly collectors, and their efforts were primarily devoted to the botanical exploration of the vicinity of New York City, it is evident that their work was limited only by the meagerness of their knowledge and the narrowness of their opportunity. Their interest in botany was as broad as the science itself, and their concept of the science no narrower, at least, than that of their contemporaries. The early pages of the *Bulletin* were devoted chiefly, it is true, to placing upon record stations for the flowering plants of the local flora; but even before the end of the first volume there was an important illustrated paper on the structure of the flowers and fruit of *Spirodela*, and within a few years the taxonomy of the lower plants began to occupy a conspicuous place. There is no reason to believe that, from the very beginning, any botanical paper was ever excluded from the pages of the *Bulletin* because foreign to its field.

The need of a publication which would serve to assist correspondence between American botanists was filled by the appearance in the *Bulletin* for November, 1873, of a botanical directory for North America; additions and corrections were published in the *Bulletin* from time to time, and two supplements appeared separately; in 1878 a new edition was issued in pamphlet form. The reestablishment of Cassino's "Naturalists' Directory" rendered further efforts in this direction superfluous. Dr. Thurber was followed in the presidency, in 1880, by John Strong Newberry, professor of geology at Columbia, and famous as a palaeobotanist. Professor Newberry was the president of the Club for ten prosperous years—although the success of the organization then, as before and since, has been due rather to the faithful and

correlated labors of devoted members than to the efforts of any one man. This decade saw many changes, recorded in and in some cases reflected by the *Bulletin*. The history of the *Bulletin* before and during this period is admirably summed up in a report printed in the second number of the seventeenth volume.* The journal which had been established as a private venture, and maintained as such for twelve years, was formally taken over by the Club at the beginning of the year 1882, and an associate editor chosen; just in time, for "the morning of April 11 witnessed the death of the genial, talented and earnest editor." Succeeding years saw a rather kaleidoscopic change in the editorial board—there were ten different members in eight years, the largest number at any one time being six—yet the publication showed steady growth and improvement. In 1886, under the editorship of Elizabeth Gertrude Britton and Frederick James Hamilton Merrill, an index to recent American botanical literature was undertaken, which greatly enhanced the value of the *Bulletin* to its readers, and has been maintained in modified form until the present time.

In April, 1888, appeared the Preliminary Catalogue of Anthophyta and Pteridophyta within one hundred miles of New York City, based upon the work of the members of the Torrey Club up to that time. It was a mere check-list, intended as a manual to be used by members for manuscript records of further work, but it was much too extensive for publication in the *Bulletin*, and was issued separately in pamphlet form. Before the end of the year, however, the need for a regular series of Club publications in monographic form had made itself felt, and the establishment of the *Memoirs of the Torrey Botanical Club* had been authorized; the first number made its appearance the following May.

At about the same time the Club began the promotion of a project for a botanical garden. An appeal for such an institution in New York City was adopted January 8, 1889, and distributed with the number of the *Bulletin* for that month. The effort met with various setbacks, and the plans required much modification, but it was the movement inaugurated at this time that eventually resulted in the establishment of the New York Botanical Garden in Bronx Park.

* Bull. Torrey Club 17: 48-52. 1890.

It was in the fall of 1888, too, that the Club began to hold meetings twice instead of once each month. At first one meeting was called the "regular" one and the other the "adjourned" one, but at the end of the following year (December 10, 1889) a constitutional amendment made the distinction unnecessary.

During the decade, 1880 to 1889, the *Bulletin* had more than doubled in size, the *Memoirs* had been begun, and the active membership of the Club had increased to more than twice its former size. Insufficiency of funds interfered with the development of the Club's activities then as it has ever since; but this very need of financial aid furnished a stimulus to further effort.

In January, 1890, Hon. Addison Brown was elected president. Unlike his predecessors, he was never a professional botanist, but as an amateur had long devoted as much time to his favorite science as could be spared from the responsibilities of his judicial career. He had been vice-president for many years, even during Thurber's presidency, and his elevation to the highest office in the gift of the Club was but a recognition of his faithful interest in its welfare. His services in this office were retained for fifteen years, and terminated only by his insistence upon retirement.

From the beginning of the year 1889, Nathaniel Lord Britton, then instructor in geology and botany (there was at that time no department of botany) at Columbia University, was the editor-in-chief of the publications of the Club, and his invaluable services in that capacity continued for nine years. The *Bulletin* had long held a conspicuous place in American botany, and its prestige was now further strengthened. The reputation of the Club and its editor grew together, and interacted upon each other. Professor Lucien Marcus Underwood, Dr. Britton's successor as professor of botany at Columbia, also followed him, two years later, as editor, and so served for five years, 1898 to 1902; the present speaker's first two years of editorship, 1903 and 1904, coinciding with the last two years of the presidency of Judge Brown.

The summer of 1891 was made notable in our history by the organization of the Scientific Alliance of New York, with the Torrey Botanical Club as one of its constituent societies. This coöperative scheme proved of mutual advantage. The Club benefited by it no less than the others, and remained a member throughout the sixteen years of the Alliance's continuance.

For the first thirty years of its existence, the headquarters of the Club had always remained at Columbia University. At first the meetings were held at the herbarium and afterward, when at last that was outgrown, the Club met for years in Hamilton Hall. In the summer of 1897, Columbia removed from the Madison Avenue and Forty-ninth Street location to the new site on Morningside Heights, and the Torrey Botanical Club at that time transferred its herbarium and changed its meeting-place to the College of Pharmacy, at 115 West 68th Street.

At the beginning of the year 1900 the Club assumed the publication of the Card Index of American botanical literature. This had been issued for the preceding six years by the Cambridge Botanical Supply Company, but had merely been reprinted by them from the pages of the *Bulletin*, and it seemed only reasonable that the Club under whose supervision the catalogue was prepared and first printed should also issue it in card form. The Card Index thus became the third series of Club publications.

Until 1900 it had been customary for the Club to hold all its meetings in the evening. The first meeting of May, in that year, however, was held in the afternoon at the New York Botanical Garden; the Club joined with Section G (Botany) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in its celebration of "Torrey Day" at the Garden, June 27,* and after the summer vacation began the custom, continued until this day, of holding one of the two meetings each month at the Garden, and in the afternoon instead of evening.

The commencement of the new century was marked by several important changes. The *Bulletin* had grown until its annual volume comprised nearly 700 pages and many plates, and the pressure for publication of technical papers tended to exclude brief communications and those of a popular character. A new monthly journal was therefore established by a vote of January 8, 1901, under the editorship of Dr. Marshall Avery Howe, and the first number of *Torreya* made its appearance before the end of the same month. The following year the publication of the proceed-

* The historical papers read on this occasion were published in the *Bulletin* (27: 540-565. 1900); the one by Professor Burgess on "The work of the Torrey Botanical Club" was prepared with much care, and contains various details of the Club's history which are not repeated here.

ings of the Club was transferred to *Torreya* from the *Bulletin*, but otherwise its scope as "a monthly journal of botanical notes and news" has remained unchanged under successive editors.

At the same meeting which authorized the establishment of *Torreya*, the Club voted to present its herbarium, subject to certain conditions, to the New York Botanical Garden; and at the following meeting the privilege long enjoyed by Columbia University of incorporating Torrey Club exchanges into its library was transferred to the library of the Garden.

Judge Brown's long term in the presidency was followed by the election of Dr. Henry Hurd Rusby, who held the office for the seven years 1905 to 1911. In spite of this comparatively long tenure, however, the tendency has been, perhaps more from accident than by design, toward rotation in office, and during the past twelve years there have been four presidents and five editors. I shall not dwell upon these later years, for many of my hearers have been familiar with their history and contributed in an important measure to it; moreover, it is so fully recorded in printed form that my omission of it need not embarrass the future historian. The expansion of the Club from a purely local association to a body of almost national scope can scarcely be emphasized, however, by anything more than the wide geographic distribution of our present active membership, and the fact that our main editorial office is now in New Haven and our editor a professor in Yale University.

About the beginning of the year 1905, the Club began to hold its evening meetings at the Museum of Natural History instead of the College of Pharmacy; and some two years later, upon the dissolution of the Scientific Alliance, the Club joined with the other members of the Alliance in becoming affiliated with the New York Academy of Sciences. Organic union with the Academy is not close, but the Club has a representative in the Council of the Academy, and the Club's meetings are announced in the Academy's weekly bulletin.

Time fails me, on an occasion like this, to refer in detail to the vast amount of valuable scientific work accomplished by members of the Torrey Botanical Club, and presented in our meetings or published in the *Bulletin*, the *Memoirs*, and *Torreya*. Nor have I found an opportunity to mention, even by name, the many who

have devoted years of faithful service to the Club's interests, as vice-presidents, secretaries, treasurers, curators, librarians, associate editors, and members of important committees. Of one standing committee, however, I feel that I must speak.

The early work of the Club was, as already pointed out, largely in the field. At first Manhattan Island furnished many interesting localities for rare plants; but, with the growth of our metropolis, the wild conditions that so delight the field-worker were pushed farther and farther from the center of the city and with this increased inaccessibility and an accompanying diversification in the interests of the members came a decline in the field-activity of the Club. All through its history, however, the Club has clung to the idea that it was its duty to arrange field-meetings for those who desired to avail themselves of such a privilege. There have been times when the field-activities of the Club seemed on the verge of extinction; but always some one has been found to serve on the field-committee, and the present committee has in the past few years seen a renewal of interest under the stimulus of its efforts, particularly those of its chairman. May the Club never fail to retain a strong hold upon the soil from which it sprung!